WORLD CHRONICLE

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PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Ambassador Ilter Turkmen
Commissioner-General of UNRWA

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SYNOPSIS

UNRWA

Ambassador Ilter Turkmen, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), discusses his agency's role in light of the peace process in the Middle East, where UNRWA is invited to attend the multilateral talks on refugees. Ambassador Turkmen says improving the living conditions of refugees in the occupied territories does not change the political context of the situation. He reveals that a number of UNRWA's staff are still detained in the occupied territories.

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VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Over the last year, historic meetings between Israel and the Arab States and the Palestinians have raised hopes for reaching a peaceful settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Meanwhile, more than 2 million Palestine refugees continue to live in crowded camps in the occupied territories and in neighbouring countries. Many of them are still dependent on international assistance provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, or UNRWA. What would happen to those refugees if a Middle East settlement is reached? Will UNRWA continue to function as a relief agency?

Our guest today, Ambassador Ilter Turkmen, is the Commissioner-General of UNRWA. A national of Turkey, Ambassador Turkmen will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Raghida Dergham, of *Al-Hayat*, of London; Thomas Osborne, of ABC News; and Behzat Baris, of *Gunaydin*, of Istanbul. Ambassador Turkmen, welcome to **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Ambassador Turkmen, perhaps you could answer those questions. What would happen to those refugees if a Middle East settlement is reached?

TURKMEN: It would depend on the scope of the solution, because if we are thinking only of a settlement, of an interim settlement in the occupied territory in the West Bank and Gaza, you will still have the problem of what to do with the refugees in Lebanon, in

Syria, and in Jordan. So I think that in looking ahead we have to distinguish between an interim settlement and a final settlement. An interim settlement will remedy the present situation in the occupied territory; it will provide Palestinian institutions a certain degree of autonomy; and it will enable the refugees in the occupied territory to improve their economic conditions. It will perhaps also find a solution to the people who are called "the displaced persons", those who left the occupied territory in 1967.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean they're different from refugees?

TURKMEN: They are different from refugees, because they were in the West Bank as refugees, and they left the West Bank and Gaza after the 1967 War. So we have something like 2.6, 2.7 million Palestinian refugees; some 400,000 of them are also displaced persons.

LITTLEJOHNS: So the second question that we asked in the introduction, will UNRWA continue to function as a relief agency, I take it that the answer is yes, it will.

TURKMEN: Certainly during the interim settlement period. But a final solution cannot have another meaning than the solution of UNRWA.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you don't think that's likely to happen anytime soon.

TURKMEN: Well, suppose that we have an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians in one year's time. It will be an interim agreement for five years, during which there will be also discussions for the final settlements. So I would give UNRWA at least another six years of life.

READEX
FICHE

DERGHAM: In the meantime, as the peace process is going on outside of the United Nations, it has been decided recently that the United Nations will be participating in the multilaterals, as the refugees are quite an important and dependent issue being discussed in one of the multilateral sessions. Have you in UNRWA gotten a set of recommendations, as you are in charge directly of the Palestinian refugees, as to what should be done in the interim process and the final settlement?

TURKMEN: The United Nations has been invited to attend the multilateral talks on refugees. This will be a unified United Nations delegation. The chairman of the delegation will be the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, and he has asked me to appoint someone from UNRWA to assist this representative. This is what we are going to do.

LITTLEJOHNS: When you say "a unified delegation", you mean that UNRWA and the Secretary-General would be represented, but not Member States of the UN? Apart from those who are already --

TURKMEN: No. The Member States will be there of course.

LITTLEJOHNS: Yes.

TURKMEN: The United Nations has been invited for the first time to attend this meeting, but there will not be a United Nations, UNDP, UNRWA, UNICEF, et cetera, it will be one United Nations delegation.

LITTLEJOHNS: I see.

DERGHAM: Just so that I could follow up on this question, on UNRWA itself, I am sure you have thought of the refugee problem as

differs in the occupied territories from Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and as you are familiar, the fact that the Ottawa meetings concentrated at one point on resolution 194, which speaks about the rehabilitation and the state and individual compensation of the refugees. Are you going to participate in the multilateral [talks] on the refugee problem on the basis of that resolution, or independent of it? How are you going to approach it, you as UNRWA?

TURKMEN: I don't think that the United Nations is going to participate on the basis of any resolution. These are multilateral talks, to which the United Nations has been invited to participate. It will discuss the general question of refugees in the Middle East. And I don't know yet what will be the position taken by the United Nations representative there. But I will send someone who will assist him. And we have the documents ready for all aspects of the refugee problem.

OSBORNE: Ambassador, in view of the close contact you've had with this problem, do you believe it was a help to your efforts or a hindrance that the Secretary-General declined to send a representative from the UN to the original peace talks as they began?

TURKMEN: You mean the bilaterals?

OSBORNE: Yes.

TURKMEN: Well, this is a question which goes beyond my competence. I think that at that stage the bilateral talks are conducted in a different context. For obvious political reasons, the United Nations was not invited. I can't say that this is something very normal, because, after all, the United Nations has been so much involved in the Middle East question from the very

beginning. But this is what has happened. And the only thing the United Nations can do is to hope that there will be a positive outcome of these negotiations. Once there is progress and there is an agreement, I'm sure that the United Nations will be invited to help the process of implementing this agreement.

BARIS: Ambassador Turkmen, in your opinion do you think a peace process might come through? It seems that such living conditions have become a way of life. Refugees come on one side and the Israeli settlement on the other. Does this not enforce a status quo, not a solution?

TURKMEN: Well, a solution is certainly possible. There are other precedents in which a situations [which were] extremely difficult, situations which did not yield themselves at first glance to solutions have been settled. It will be a difficult negotiation because of the de facto situation, as you say, but there are certainly ways of resolving the problem.

DERGHAM: There's a new administration to take over in Washington around the 20th of January, and this Clinton administration emphasized throughout the campaign human rights. I suppose that would include human rights of people under occupation. As someone in charge of an agency that watches that status, the human status, or the living status of people both under occupation and refugee camps outside, how would you describe the level of respect of the human rights of the Palestinians under the Israeli occupation?

TURKMEN: Well, what we have in the occupied territory is an occupation regime. And, since 1967, and in particular, since the end of 1987, when the intifadah started, this is not a mild occupation regime. I think that my report has emphasized the

character of this occupation. It imposes severe restrictions on the Palestinians, on their political rights, on their economic rights, on their social rights. It obliges them to live under curfews for prolonged periods of time. There are many detained people. You know there are some 12,000 detained Palestinians in the occupied territory. This is it, I mean, it's an occupation, and not a mild one.

DERGHAM: And so you are -- I suppose you mean to say that there are violations of the human rights of those people under occupation by the Israeli authorities?

TURKMEN: Well, if you are detained without trial, if you are obliged to remain under curfew for weeks and months, if you cannot move from one area in the occupied territory to another, I don't know how you would qualify the situation.

OSBORNE: Ambassador, if I could follow up on Ms. Dergham's question, in a broader sense, what message would you want to send President-elect Clinton at this point, in terms of your concerns?

TURKMEN: Well, I'm the head of an humanitarian agency. I should be very careful not to make any political statement. But as I pointed out in my report, one of the witnesses of the peace process, as we have been able to identify, because we see the daily lives of the Palestinians, is that disjunction between the peace process and the situation on the ground. And this is why we are saying that it will help that process a lot if there is some improvement in the conditions of life of the Palestinians under occupation.

DERGHAM: But some object to that, Ambassador. You're very well aware that there's a political objection to this because there

have been attempts in the past to say the improvement of the social, humanitarian life of the Palestinians will be the way to a solution, like the Schultz plan, and then it was objected to because that would -- it was said that that would diminish the political rights of the Palestinians. Where do you stand on that?

TURKMEN: I don't think that the improvement of the conditions of life of the refugees is going to change the political context of the problem. You can have refugees living under much more decent conditions, and [they would] still be refugees in the political sense. But what I'm talking about is not a radical change in their status, it's just the improvement in their daily living conditions, the removal of the roadblocks, the removal of some of the checkpoints, the removal of the watch towers in the camps, the freedom of movement between Gaza and the West Bank and between different sectors of the West Bank, the release of the detainees -- things like that. This is not going to change the political context.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, our guest is Ambassador Ilter Turkmen, Commissioner-General of UNRWA. Behzat Baris.

BARIS: Ambassador, it has been noted that among the Arabic people that Palestinians rate high in education. Could you enlighten us further on the subject? Is this partially because UNRWA runs the schools?

TURKMEN: Well, I hope it is partially due to UNRWA's efforts from the very beginning. What happened when UNRWA was set up was that UNRWA was not able to help the economic and social advancement of the Palestinians because of lack of resources and because of political constraints. And what we did from the very beginning is

to put the emphasis on human resource development, education and health. And these were extremely successful programs, and we are running today more than 600 elementary and preparatory schools, and eight vocational training centres. And many graduates from UNRWA schools have found jobs in other countries. Most of the people who went to the Gulf countries were UNRWA graduates, and they had a good income in the Gulf, as you know, but things have changed, and most of these people now have returned to Jordan, to Gaza, to other countries in the Near East, and we have the huge problem of unemployment.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you have a scholarship programme for higher education?

TURKMEN: We have a scholarship programme. Yes, we have a scholarship programme also.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do many of them come to the United States, for example, to go to colleges here?

TURKMEN: No, we can't afford that, to send them to the United States. What UNRWA pays is for university studies in the Arab countries and in Turkey.

LITTLEJOHNS: But do individual countries perhaps extend scholarships?

TURKMEN: Yes, there are scholarships. Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Many? I mean-- ?

TURKMEN: Yes, there are.

DERGHAM: Ambassador, I was just going to ask you how was your programme, or what UNRWA does throughout for the Palestinian refugees. How has that been affected by the Gulf war, that is, after a lot of the Palestinians have been displaced away from the Gulf States? That's on one level, and secondly, the Arab contribution to UNRWA, in particular, the wealthy Arab States, have they backed away from further contribution to UNRWA?

TURKMEN: Well, the Gulf war has affected UNRWA very much. There were some 300,000 Palestinians who returned to Jordan alone. And they came with their savings, most of them, but, you know, the savings are used up very rapidly if you don't have an income, if you don't have a job. And the immediate effect on UNRWA was the increased amounts for admission to our schools. We have admitted an additional 7,000 children approximately to our schools. And of course a greater demand for health services from UNRWA. So we had to incur additional expenses to cover these needs.

DERGHAM: And what about contributions?

TURKMEN: As far as the contributions are concerned, the Gulf war had the result of the contributions being curtailed to the Palestinian institutions. The direct contributions of the Gulf countries to Palestinian institutions have been stopped. As far as UNRWA is concerned, the countries, the Gulf countries have continued to pay their contributions to UNRWA, but, I must say that these contributions are far from being at an adequate level.

DERGHAM: Because in the report of the Secretary-General, the last report, the Secretary-General expressed worry about the reflection of the lack of funds on the political situation in Lebanon and in the occupied territories if funds are not provided. Could you explain? I mean, here's a gamble with an explosive

political situation, if financially it's not dealt with. Can you elaborate on this and explain why the worry?

TURKMEN: Yes, I just explained to the Special Political Committee that as far as 1992 goes we have been able to cover our budgetary requirements, but we will have a problem in 1993 because some western donors have indicated they're going to reduce their contributions. And the only way we can compensate for this loss is to get more contributions from the wealthy Arab States and from some other States.

OSBORNE: Ambassador, many UN agencies are concerned about the steps being taken by the Secretary-General to restructure the world body. Will you be affected by this restructuring, or perhaps maybe even benefitted?

TURKMEN: I don't think we are going to be affected. UNRWA is a programme in the technical sense of United Nations terminology, but we are attached to the General Assembly. We have a separate budget, we have a separate personnel department, we are financed mostly by voluntary contributions. We have a budget of something like $300 million, so $290 million are financed by voluntary contributions, and we receive from the United Nations proper only something like $10 million to cover the salaries of the international staff, including my salary.

LITTLEJOHNS: Which Member State is the largest contributor?

TURKMEN: The largest single contributor is the United States, which provides us every year something like $75 million. Then we have the European Community, which gives us something like $50 million every year, collectively, the Commission.

LITTLEJOHNS: And individual members of the Community also?

TURKMEN: Yes, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: On top of that?

TURKMEN: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: I see.

BARIS: I'm going to follow Michael's question. Given the fact there will be a new administration in Washington, how do you realistically assess America will give the additional funding, the voluntary funding for UNRWA?

TURKMEN: Well, it's not the first time that the United States has elected a Democratic president. A Democrat as president --

[LAUGHTER]

-- and a Democratic Congress. We had this before, and they paid regularly to UNRWA. I don't expect any change in this respect.

BARIS: You don't?

TURKMEN: No.

DERGHAM: We had heard on this programme, in fact, some people have spoken of hostages, that is UNRWA employees held as hostages by Israel. I think it was the Staff Committee, the President of the Staff Committee on **WORLD CHRONICLE** said there were hundreds of civil servants employed by the United Nations, and most of them from UNRWA, being held hostages by the Israeli authorities. What is the number now, and have you been negotiating for their release?

TURKMEN: Well, in the occupied territory, some UNRWA employees are detained. The number is something like 16. I can't remember the exact number. But the total number of detainees is 16, in the occupied territory, it's 16.

DERGHAM: UNRWA employees?

TURKMEN: UNRWA employees.

DERGHAM: 60 UNRWA employees are detained by the Israeli authorities?

TURKMEN: No, 16.

DERGHAM: 16.

TURKMEN: Yes.

DERGHAM: And for how long have they been detained?

TURKMEN: Oh, for various terms, and we see them, we can visit them. But they are Palestinians, of course, as you know, but they are the employees of UNRWA, and this is --

LITTLEJOHNS: Why have they been detained, Ambassador?

TURKMEN: This is one problem that we have, that we were never told very clearly why they have been detained. Security is always the reason.

DERGHAM: But how long some of them have been in detention? From what I understand, again, from this programme, from the guest on this programme, it's been a matter of years, not only months.

TURKMEN: Like many other Palestinians, yes.

DERGHAM: But what's the UN doing? These are employees by the United Nations. I mean, these are employed by -- they're civil servants, they're not -- the UN is responsible for them, aren't you?

TURKMEN: Of course we are responsible for them.

DERGHAM: So what are you doing about it?

TURKMEN: But they have also -- they are Palestinians, and when you are -- they come under the -- the laws apply to Palestinians. So we cannot say that they have any immunity --

LITTLEJOHNS: But that doesn't --

TURKMEN: -- from arrest. But we want to know why they have been arrested. And why they are not given the right to go to a court and to explain their position, their grievances. This has not been done.

LITTLEJOHNS: But they're not second class citizens because they're Palestinians, surely, are they?

TURKMEN: No, they are not second class Palestinians, but they come under the laws applicable to the occupied territory. I mean, if they go to court, we will understand what they have done. Our main contention is that we are not told what they have done, and that some of them are detained without trial.

OSBORNE: Ambassador, while the peace talks have not been substantive to date, as you pointed out in your recent speech, and others have, at least people are sitting at the same table. But

have you seen behind the scenes any progress in your efforts, in your work with UNRWA? Any advances? Because they are sitting at the same table.

TURKMEN: Well, the fact that they are sitting at the same table is already tremendous progress. And I think that there is a genuine effort now to try to find a solution, at least an interim solution, to the problem. I don't think that we can say that there has been until now a breakthrough, or the prospect of a breakthrough, for the moment. But they will resume now, they will resume under new political conditions because there has been a change in Israel, there is a new government, which has indicated more clearly its commitment to the peace process; there is a new government, a new President in the United States, and I hope that the peace talks will begin again with renewed vigour.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you think 1993 could be the breakthrough year?

TURKMEN: Well, it has to be, because --

LITTLEJOHNS: Perhaps, given these good omens that you've mentioned?

TURKMEN: Well, one year has passed, and if you remember, at that time it was estimated that it will take one year to have an agreement on the interim settlement, so it must --

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Turkmen, I'm afraid our time has past. That's all the time we have for this programme. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Our guest has been Ambassador Ilter Turkmen, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA. He was interviewed here at United

Nations Headquarters in New York by Raghida Dergham, of *Al-Hayat* of London; Thomas Osborne of ABC News; and Behzat Baris of *Gunaydin* of Istanbul.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

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